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The French May Have a 'Watergate Autumn'

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PARIS—With last week's resignation of Defense Minister Charles Hernu and Sunday's announcement of responsibility by the French government, the Greenpeace affair has passed a significant turning point—from the detective "whodunit" to a serious political crisis. As long as doubt remained over who did sink the nuclear-protest ship Rainbow Warrior in a New Zealand harbor July 10, many in France accepted the need for confidentiality about the alleged involvement of the French secret service. But even before Sunday's announcement by Prime Minister Laurent Fabius that the bombing was done by France's external espionage agency, assumptions of a cover-up were causing a political backlash. Comparisons with Watergate have become unavoidable.

Constitutionally, President Francois Mitterrand is entitled to stay on at the Elysee until 1988. Hawks on the right are already using the Greenpeace imbroglio to demand the resignation of the Socialist government, though Neo-Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac has made conciliatory remarks. If the conservatives win next March's parliamentary vote, a growing number of observers doubt whether the president will be able to stay in office.

Meantime the infighting clouds the debate over France's independent nuclear deterrent. The *force de frappe nucleaire*—as it is known here—is one of the few points of political consensus in France. With the possible exception of the Communists, the right, left and middle agree on the wisdom of France's maintaining such a force—and on its right to do so. France's factions more or less agree, as well, on the nation's right to carry out nuclear tests in its Pacific territory.

The escalating political scandal at home—combined with French fumbling in the face of the bluster from New Zealand's prime minister, David Lange—threatens to serve those with an interest in stopping the tests better than a decade of amateur Greenpeace dramatics. Greenpeace on Sunday announced it intends to demand from the French government an apology and damages for the sinking of the ship. So it's as urgent for France's allies as it is for the French public that the remaining mysteries of the Greenpeace sinking should now be swiftly dispelled.

Even before Mr. Fabius's announcement that France's General Directorate for External Security, or DGSE, planted the bombs, the few officially confirmed facts were eloquent. A team of three French secret service underwater combat officers, accompanied by a mysterious doctor and ostensibly on a reconnaissance mission, matched feats of nautical prowess off the New Zealand coast with amorous exploits on land. Another pair of French agents, masquerading as a Swiss honeymoon couple, left a trail of clues culminating in imprudent telephone calls to home base; this led to their arrest and indictment for murder and conspiracy. The two languish in New Zealand jails. Their trial is set for Nov. 4. Some international jurists have felt France could obtain their release by admitting they were acting under orders.

Disclosures published by Le Monde last week may cause the charges against them to be modified. A third team of French underwater combat specialists, say these accounts, actually blew up the ship. They got away, apparently with the aid of a still wider network of agents. Mr. Fabius made no direct reference to this team in his Sunday statement. But if the Le Monde accounts are true, it's inconceivable that senior French military officials were unaware of its existence. When New Zealand accused France last month of the bombing, French officials chose to stonewall. Only on Sunday did Mr. Fabius acknowledge that a government-commissioned report, which made a valiant attempt to exonerate the secret service, was in error. Until then the field had been left to the French press, which performed an investigative role it often shirks. The question that remains after Mr. Fabius's remarks is at what level the cover-up was ordered.

The extent of the damage may become clearer within the next few months, if Greenpeace fulfills its pledge of leading a flotilla of protest vessels to Mururoa to interfere with the nuclear test program. France's new defense minister, Paul Quiles, will face that situation in a tense pre-electoral climate. How he and the new DGSE head to be appointed today acquit themselves, however, is tied to French internal politics.

For Mr. Mitterrand, the loss of Mr. Hernu is doubly damaging. The former defense minister, a longtime political ally, had won the confidence both of the armed forces and of many in the conservative opposition. In the event of a possible center-left coalition after the March parliamentary election, Mr. Hernu had been expected to play a significant role. Mr. Mitterrand sacrificed him only when it became unavoidable.

In terms of damage limitation, however, it may already have been too late. Neither Sunday's admission nor Mr. Hernu's departure nor the simultaneous dismissal of his subordinate, the head of the DGSE, Adm. Pierre Lacoste, will be sufficient to cut short the scandal. It all adds up to cruel fate for the Mitterrand administration. Had a Portuguese photographer not been killed in the bomb attack, few Frenchmen would actually have disagreed in principle with the sinking of the Greenpeace protest ship.

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